Connecticut River Conservancy

Clean water. Healthy habitat. Thriving communities.

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For the Environment Committee
Testimony of Alicea Charamut, River Steward
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The Connecticut River Conservancy **supports the concept of HB 6637 An Act Requiring an Invasive Species Stamp for the Operation of a Motorboat on the Inland Waters of the State** and would like to take this opportunity to describe the significant deficiencies in our state's ability to manage aquatic invasive plants and the need for additional, dedicated resources to address emerging and current threats at the state level.

The Connecticut River Conservancy is the voice for the Connecticut River watershed, from source to sea. We collaborate with partners across four states to protect and advocate for your rivers and educate and engage communities. We bring people together to prevent pollution, improve habitat, and promote enjoyment of your river and its tributary streams. Healthy rivers support healthy economies.

Connecticut cannot get ahead of emerging threats from aquatic invasive plants in ALL of its waters due to lack of resources as a result of staffing and budget reductions to DEEP. Investment in a coordinated effort that includes effective prevention, education, and control in rivers, lakes, and ponds is critical to protecting the ecological and economic value that resources such as the Connecticut River provide. Connecticut's agencies' inability to respond appropriately to the rapid spread of hydrilla, a particularly noxious non-native invasive plant, in the Connecticut River is a consequence of lack of investment in proper coordination of invasive plant management at the state level. This particular invasive species will have significant negative impacts our resources if we ***do not act now***.

Hydrilla in the Connecticut River

Hydrilla is non-native invasive plant first identified in the Connecticut River in Keeney Cove in Glastonbury in 2016. It has since been found from Holyoke, Massachusetts to Haddam, CT. Hydrilla impacts our lakes, ponds and rivers in several ways:

- It spreads **rapidly** and forms extremely dense mats that fill the water column from soil to surface. It can grow up to a foot per day and can reach 25 feet.
- It inhibits fishing, boating and swimming.
- It impairs the quality of and habitat in and on our water by creating a monoculture.
- It harbors algae that produces potentially toxic cyanobacteria.

Control of hydrilla is difficult due to the fact that the plant reproduces in many ways, including vegetative fragments, tubers, turions, and seeds. Tubers can remain viable in the soil for seven years or longer. Mechanical controls, such as cutters, cultivators, and dredges often create plant fragments that can spread the infestation.

The hydrilla found in the Connecticut River is an enigma. First, it is unusual in that no one has been able to find tubers when collecting samples. Second, genetic analysis performed on 20 samples collected during a

survey for hydrilla on the Connecticut River in September of 2018 all have the same genetic sequence but are different from any other variety of hydrilla found in North America. It is genetically similar to that found in Japan and North Korea but not an exact match. Third, this variety appears to be extremely robust. For a plant that is already known for rapid spread and high density, this is very bad news. In the areas around the Coginchaug and Mattabesset Rivers in Middletown, a few stands of the plant have turned into a dense mat the size of a basketball court from one growing season to the next.

More bad news is that hydrilla is one of the more costly aquatic invasive plants to manage. But ignoring the problem and failing to develop a management plan will be costly as well. The many marinas along the river will find their docks hemmed in by these dense mats. Municipal and public docks such as those at Riverfront Recapture in Hartford, the new boathouse in Glastonbury in which the town has invested millions, and at Harbor Park in Middletown that has been that city's tradition and connection to the river for generations will, too.

Need for response and lack of resources

Where will municipalities, businesses and private dock owners go to seek answers when this happens? Where will the hundreds of thousands of dollars come from to pay for management? Neither CT DEEP nor the CT Agricultural Experiment Station currently have the resources to devise meaningful answers or offer funding solutions. The State of Connecticut no longer has a coordinated invasive species program and the majority of funding dedicated to invasive plant management that does exist has been directed to lakes and ponds. In addition, there is also no longer coordination at the watershed level from the federal government due to the decision of the US Fish and Wildlife Service not to refill the position of the Invasive Plant Control Coordinator for the Silvio O Conte Wildlife refuge.

There is still much we don't know about this variety of hydrilla such as:

- How will this variety of hydrilla tolerate brackish water?
- How will management strategies used elsewhere have to be adapted to tidal waters (remember that the tidal influence in the Connecticut River extends to north of Hartford)?
- Which management strategies will work best in order to control hydrilla without threatening native and important aquatic resources?

The state of Connecticut MUST provide the resources to get ahead of an emerging crisis and address the problem in the Connecticut River in order to protect its resources and to prevent the spread of hydrilla to other bodies of water in the state.

Need for additional resources and aid for management of all aquatic invasive plants

We must ensure that any new dedicated revenue source to combat aquatic invasive plants sets aside a significant percentage of annual revenue to be awarded through grants to municipalities and other outside entities.

The Connecticut River Conservancy will soon begin its third season recruiting, training and deploying dozens of volunteers and coordinating with partner groups for monitoring and removal of European water chestnut, another aquatic invasive plant that can be found in the Connecticut River. Like hydrilla, it spreads rapidly, impairs water quality and impedes recreation. Unlike hydrilla, it is easily identified and can be managed by trained volunteers. Groups like CRC had to pick up where the state left off in managing these plants when CT DEEP had to cut funding for the invasive species management program. It can be very challenging for non-profit organizations to find funding to for this type of work and we have picked up this slack for our

state agencies with no money available for assistance from the state. In addition, Budgets for FYs 2015 and 2016 included funding for aquatic invasive species grants to municipalities ($300K and $250K). Demand greatly exceeded available funds. Funding for these grants is no longer available.

HB 6637 as a Solution?

We find ourselves again searching for new revenue sources to provide basic environmental services thanks to our budget crisis. We are again asking a major stakeholder group to pay for this service in the form of a boat stamp. This is an opportunity to have a frank discussion of costs and benefits. The boating community on the Connecticut River will be heavily impacted by hydrilla in the next two summers. Thick weed beds will take over marinas and some access points will be lost from late July to October. There will be little assistance at the state level if we do nothing. CRC welcomes a conversation about possible solutions with all stakeholders.

As for a boat stamp as a viable solution, there are elements that must be addressed for a boat stamp to be an effective solution and revenue source:

1) For boats registered in CT: Recommend that the $5 fee be applied to all boats registered in CT (i.e. not just those operated on inland waters) in order to ensure sufficient revenue for prevention, coordination, and grants to municipalities and non-profits for aquatic invasive plant control (~$600K/yr).
2) For boats registered out-of-state and operating on CT inland waters: Require a person on board to have an invasive species stamp purchased through the DEEP Automated License System.
3) Change effective date from October 1 2019 to April 1 2020: This is needed for the requirement to match up with the CT Boat Registration time schedule.
4) Changes needed to the existing language for the Connecticut Lakes and Ponds Preservation Account (Sec. 14-21aa of the CGS).
    - Add CT River because that is where work needs to be done to prevent the export of hydrilla.
    - Ensure that funds may be used for the administration of a grant program and for administrative support for the Invasive Plants Council.
    - Establish match requirements for grants
    - Ensure that a significant percentage of annual revenue is awarded through grants to municipalities and other outside entities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information and input. We look forward to participating in any further discussions on improving Connecticut's ability to address aquatic invasive plants in all of its waters.